

Ornitholidays

Free State, KZN & Lesotho Birding Tour

4 – 16 November 2007

Trip Report



Cover photo: Cape Longclaw, Memel.

Tour Summary

Tour Participants

M. Bamforth

D. Barrick

John and Pat Bartley

D. and K. Caffyn

Tour Leader: Leon Marais

Photo acknowledgments

Leon Marais

Total Distance Travelled

2290 km

Temperature Range

8 – 29 Degrees Celsius

Total Birds Seen

205

Total Mammals Seen

26

Trip Report

Compiled by Leon Marais

Trip Breakdown (all distances are for vehicle trips only)

Day 1: Sunday 4 November 2007.

JNB International Airport via Suikerbosrand to Golden Gate National Park - 358km.

Weather: Fine and clear to start, with thunderstorms in the afternoon; 13 – 24 Degrees Celsius.

Day 2: Monday 5 November 2007.

Golden Gate National Park: Blesbok Loop, walk to Glenreenen Rest Camp, Oribi and Blesbok Loops PM – 39 KM.

Weather: clear and mild AM, windy with rain PM; 11 – 20 Degrees Celsius.

Day 3: Tuesday 6 November 2007.

Golden Gate National Park: Oribi Road and district roads AM, Holkrans walk after breakfast, district roads PM – 122 km.

Weather: Cold, with wind and rain; 11 – 16 Degrees Celsius.

Day 4: Wednesday 7 November 2007.

Golden Gate National Park to Giant's Castle Game Reserve: Blesbok and Oribi Loops AM, Giant's Castle via Oliviershoek Pass and Estcourt after breakfast - 282km.

Weather: Cool and cloudy, clearing partially in the afternoon; 10 – 20 Degrees Celsius.

Day 5: Thursday 8 November 2007.

Giants Castle Game Reserve: Camp walk and Vulture Hide AM, Champagne Pools drive / walk PM – 16 km.

Weather: Clear and mild AM, clouding over PM; 12 -23 Degrees Celsius

Day 6: Friday 9 November 2007.

Giant's Castle Game Reserve: Main Caves walk AM, River Walk PM.

Weather: Mist to start, clearing later and becoming fine and mild, 11 - 24 Degrees Celsius.

Day 7: Saturday 10 November 2007.

Giant's Castle to Sani Pass Hotel: Main Caves walk AM, Sani Pass via Hlatikulu and Himeville after breakfast, afternoon walk in hotel grounds - 140 km.

Weather: Clear and mild; 9 - 24 Degrees Celsius.

Day 8: Sunday 11 November 2007.

Lesotho plateau via Sani Pass- 70km.

Weather: Fine, warm and clear (an absolutely stunning day!); 10 – 26 Degrees Celsius.

Day 9: Monday 12 November 2007.

Nxumeni Forest (Donnybrook) and Prof Piper's Garden AM, afternoon walk in hotel grounds PM, 150 km. Weather: Hot and windy to start, cold and cloudy in the afternoon (typically variable mountain weather...); 14 - 25 Degrees Celsius.

Day 10: Tuesday 13 November 2007.

Sani Pass to Memel, via Pevensey, Chelmsford Nature Reserve and Newcastle - 460 km.
Weather: Clear and hot; 10 – 29 Degrees Celsius.

Day 11: Wednesday 14 November 2007.

Eastern perimeter of Seekoivlei Nature Reserve AM, Reserve and Western Perimeter PM – 107 km.
Weather: Clear and Hot; 13 – 25 Degrees Celsius.

Day 12: Thursday 15 November 2007.

Reserve and Eastern Perimeter AM, Verkykerskop Road PM – 145 km.

Weather: Warm and windy AM; thunderstorms PM; 11 - 26 Degrees Celsius.

Day 13: Friday 16 November 2007.

Mount Pellaan Road AM, Memel to JNB International Airport via Marievale after breakfast - 402 km.

Weather: Cold and cloudy to start, becoming hot and stormy PM; 8 – 29 Degrees Celsius

Day 1: Sunday 4th November 2007

The trip began at a rather busy arrivals hall at O. R. Tambo International Airport. After collecting baggage and getting organised we headed out of Johannesburg, thankfully quiet traffic-wise due to the day being a Sunday, and drove south-east along the N3 to Suikerbosrand Nature Reserve. As soon as we turned off the main highway the birding began, and one of the first species to be seen was the magnificent Long-tailed Widowbird, an icon of summer highveld birding, typically seen fluttering phantom-like over the open grasslands. Heading into the reserve we saw Northern Black Korhaan (calling in usual raucous fashion from atop a termite mound on a hillside), Blacksmith, Crowned and Wattled Lapwings, Rufous-naped Lark, Barn, White-throated and Greater Striped Swallows (the Barns having recently arrived from the Northern Hemisphere), Capped Wheatear, Ant-eating Chat, African Stonechat, Cape Longclaw, Red Bishop, Yellow Canary and Cape Bunting, among others. We drove on to the picnic site in the reserve and had a light lunch of ham and cheese sandwiches, washed down with tea and coffee, before embarking on a short walk into the surrounding bush. We found ourselves among some horse paddocks, and recorded a few new species such as Fiscal Flycatcher, Cape Robin Chat, Dark-capped Bulbul, Mountain Wheatear and Mocking Cliff-Chat. With the later-than-normal flight arrival time having eaten up most of the morning we didn't have too much time in the reserve, and were soon on our way south towards Golden Gate National Park, with a Spotted Thick-Knee seen on the way out. En-route we saw Greater Flamingo and African Spoonbills briefly, and then faced a typical dark and vengeful highveld thunderstorm (the word 'highveld' refers to the grassy inland plateau that covers much of the eastern / central interior of the country) before arriving at the Brandwag Hotel (pictured at right) late in the afternoon. We then had some time to unpack and unwind (and admire the views), and met for dinner and bird-list duties at 7:00 PM.

Daily Bird Total: 54 species.

Bird Trip Total: 54 species.

Day 2: Monday 5th November 2007

With a mostly clear and mild start to the day we drove out on the Blesbok Loop drive through the park, passing the ship's-prow-like red and yellow sandstone formation after which the park was named (the first farmer in the area beheld the cliffs in the light of the setting sun and thus named the area). On the loop, which winds up through short, open grasslands, we saw birds such as Pied Starling, Black-headed Heron, Black and Alpine Swifts, Ground Woodpecker, Rock Martin, Wailing, Wing-snapping and Levillant's Cisticolas, Long-billed Pipit, Cape Longclaw, Cape Vulture, Yellow Bishop and others, as well as mammals such as Burchell's Zebra, Black Wildebeest, Blesbok, Mountain Reedbuck and Grey Rhebok. We also had the fortune of coming across a Serval, which we observed for a quarter of an hour as it prowled through the grass quite close by. These long-legged felids are typically found in grassy areas, where they hunt prey such as rodents and birds, and although they are fairly widespread they are seldom seen and rarely viewed for extended periods during the day. With the coffee and rusks that we enjoyed earlier starting to wear off we drove back to the hotel for a lovely breakfast and then embarked on a short walk up to the Glenreenen Rest Camp. Shortly after beginning we were surprised by two Secretarybirds (always a favourite on any tour) taking off not far away and soaring up into the blue sky above us. Other highlights for the walk included a Red-chested Cuckoo (a very good sighting), and camp birds such as Cape Canary, Bokmakierie, Olive Thrush, Streaky-headed Seed-Eater, Speckled Pigeon, Laughing Dove and others. We returned for a bit of a rest and some lunch, and tackled both the Blesbok and Oribi Loops in the afternoon. The weather had turned however, and the afternoon was misty and cold up on the high ground. Highlights included a superb

sighting of a Black-shouldered Kite and its rodent prey (picture to the left), and a Black-backed Jackal spotted running through the grass high up on the Oribi Loop. We also got some glimpses of the jagged outline of the main Drakensberg range to the south-east, where we would be heading in the next few days. We arrived back at camp in the late afternoon, and once again met for dinner at seven PM.

Daily Bird Total: 46 species.

New Birds for the day: 29 species.

Bird Trip Total: 83 species.

Day 3: Tuesday 6th November 2007

With solid overcast and intermittent rain we headed out at 6: 30 AM for our second morning at Golden Gate. Once again we did the Oribi Loop, and then headed further on to a district road to the east of the park. After climbing up over a row of hills we descended into a wide, open valley dotted with termite mounds and rocky outcrops. Despite the heavy but intermittent rain we managed to have our customary coffee-and-rusk stop before heading back for a late breakfast at the Brandwag Hotel. New birds for the morning included Southern Bald Ibis (not a very good sighting), Spur-winged Goose, Banded Martin, Buff-streaked Chat and Cape Grassbird. After breakfast we went on a walk up to the cliffs behind the hotel. We'd hoped that the rain would hold off, but it wasn't long after starting that the heavens opened and our hopes of staying dry were dashed. The walk turned out to be trickier than expected, but the group did well in negotiating the long ladders and steep descents in the rain, and we did manage to record two new bird species – Malachite Sunbird and Familiar Chat. We then had some time to dry off before lunch, and after an afternoon break we headed out towards the town of Clarens for some roadside birding. Birds for the afternoon included Rufous-chested Sparrowhawk, Jackal and Steppe Buzzards, Swainson's Spurfowl, Helmeted Guineafowl, White-necked Raven, Cape and Southern Masked Weavers, Black-throated and Cape Canaries, as well as newly-ploughed and partially flooded fields teeming with Yellow-billed Duck, Egyptian Goose, Spurwing Goose, Hadedda Ibis, Helmeted Guineafowl, Speckled Pigeons, Red Bishops and Long-tailed Widowbirds. We arrived back late in the afternoon, and as usual had some time to relax before meeting for dinner in the evening.

Daily Total: 59 species.

New Birds for the day: 12 species.

Bird Trip Total: 95 species.

Day 4: Wednesday 7th November 2007

On our last morning at Golden Gate the weather gave us no respite (see picture to left). Well, being in the mountains inclement weather should come as no surprise, I suppose. In good British fashion we didn't let it stop us however, and drove the Blesbok and Oribi Loops for the last time. Half-way up the Blesbok Loop we stopped for coffee and rusks, and then continued, recording Grey-winged Francolin and Yellow-breasted Pipit in quick succession, as well as other species such as African Snipe, Ground Woodpecker, Cape Crow, Cape Rock-Thrush, Cape White-eye, Yellow Bishop and Pin-tailed Whydah for the morning. After another fine breakfast back at the hotel we packed our goods and departed for Giant's Castle in the central section of the Drakensberg Escarpment. In the eastern section of Golden Gate National Park we came across herds of mammals such as Black Wildebeest, Blesbok and Burchell's Zebra, as well as Chacma Baboons and a pair of Grey Crowned Cranes, followed further on by a flock of Southern Bald Ibis feeding in a field quite close to the road (great views this time!). At the huge Sterkfontein Dam we saw

huge flocks of Red-Knobbed Coot, as well as South African Shelduck and Three-banded Plover. We descended the escarpment via the Oliviershoek Pass and, once down on the hotter and drier plains below the mountains, we saw species such as Cape Vulture, Booted Eagle, Fan-tailed Widowbird, South African Cliff Swallow, Red-billed Quelea and African Pipit. Unfortunately the low overcast conditions obscured the views of the magnificent Amphitheatre of the Northern 'Berg (as the Drakensberg is known locally) that can be had along the route. We had a lunch stop in Winterton before continuing on to Estcourt and the Ntambamhlope Road to Giant's Castle. We arrived in the late afternoon, with the mountains still lost in the clouds, and checked into our wonderful chalets. The wonderful indigenous gardens all around were planted with local trees such as Buddleja sp, and Leucosidia serecia (Ouhout), and a wonderful array of wild flowers. Our porches offered a superb place from which to sit and observe the birds in the gardens, which included Malachite and Greater Double-Collared Sunbirds, Olive Thrush, Cape Robin-Chat, Dark-capped Bulbul, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow, Red-winged Starling, Cape Canary, Streaky-headed Seed-Eater, Southern Grey-headed Sparrow and others. Later on we met in the restaurant for dinner, and afterwards completed our lists in the lounge area of John and Pat's room, before retiring for a well-deserved rest in anticipation of a wonderful following day.

Daily Total: 72 species.

New Birds for the day: 15 species.

Bird Trip Total: 110 species.

Day 5: Thursday 8th November 2007

The day dawned fine and clear on our first morning at Giant's Castle, giving us our first views of the majestic and imposing main range a few kilometres away. We started with a walk around the camp, but found that we'd been a bit late (having adjusted to a six-thirty AM departure at Golden Gate, which was fine under the particular weather conditions there, but was too late in clear and mild weather experienced at Giant's) and most the birds seemed to be in a post-dawn lull. We did however manage to get our first views of Bush Blackcap (picture on right), Barratt's Warbler and Cape Batis (though these were not seen by all members of the group), and others. We returned to camp and enjoyed a good, hearty breakfast before getting ready to go up to the vulture hide. We left at 8:30, and enjoyed a slow and bumpy half-hour ride up the mountain in a 4 x 4. The driver dropped us off at the hide without further explanation, and we soon noted that there wasn't any fresh meat or bones at the feeding area as we had requested. We decided to rather enjoy the views from outside the hide, and watched the White-necked Ravens flying around, also recording Familiar Chat, Cape Rock-Thrush and African Harrier-Hawk. We then noticed the vehicle returning and surmised correctly that they were bringing up some meat. We re-entered the hide and, after the meat was dumped, were soon rewarded with fantastic views as an adult Lammergeier came flying past several times. Unfortunately it didn't land, yet I think that the sight of this Lammergeier soaring with the main Drakensberg range in the background was really the essence of the tour. Spectacular, to say the least, and after an hour and a half in the hide we took a lovely walk back down to the camp for lunch (pictured left). After lunch, and a rest of course, we took a drive down the entrance road to Champagne Pools, and then walked down to the pools and drove back to camp. Other birds recorded for the day included Gurney's Sugarbird, Southern Black Tit, Red-necked Spurfowl, Fork-tailed Drongo, Black-backed Puff-back, African Firefinch and Common Waxbill, among numerous others, as well as a large herd of Eland, Africa's largest antelope and the dominant animal in the culture of the San people that previously inhabited the area. Once again we had some time on our porches back at camp to spot

birds from the comfort of a chair, and met for dinner at seven PM.

Daily Total: 50 species.

New Birds for the day: 11 species.

Bird Trip Total: 121 species.

Day 6: Friday 9th November 2007

With the sun rising so early in the summer the best we could do was to meet at 5: 30 AM for a cup of coffee and a rusk or two before heading out, this time on a walk towards the Main Caves, where some of the best of South African San rock-art is to be found (due to vandalism and careless tourists the caves have been fenced off and one needs a guide to be able to see the paintings – we walked to the gate and back without entering the caves, which are only open later in the morning). The morning started off somewhat cool and misty, and by the time we were out the mist was lifting and a fine day was just beginning. The sunshine seemed to bring the birds out and we had a most wonderful experience looking at birds with the rugged peaks and cliffs of the escarpment as a backdrop. Birds for the morning included White-breasted Cormorant, Southern Bald Ibis, Cape Vulture, Rock Kestrel, African Olive Pigeon, Lemon Dove (we had superb views of the normally shy species, which is usually only seen as it flies off), Red-chested Cuckoo, Bush Blackcap, Chorister Robin-Chat, Dark-capped Yellow Warbler, Cape Grassbird, Lazy Cisticola, Karoo Prinia, Dusky Flycatcher, Cape Batis, Paradise Flycatcher, Forest Canary, Bush Blackcap and others. It really was a lovely morning (see picture to right) and, for me anyway, stood out as a few hours to be remembered for a long time to come. Back at the camp we had breakfast, and then had some personal time before lunch. In the late afternoon we headed out on another walk, this time along the river below the camp and then out through the day visitors' area and back along the entrance road. No new species were seen, but it was nevertheless enjoyable and we returned to camp before sunset. Once again dinner was scheduled for 7:00 Pm, after which we retired in anticipation of our drive south and west along the base of the Drakensberg to our next port-of-call.

Daily Bird Total: 56 species.

New Birds for the day: 13 species.

Bird Trip Total: 134 species.

Day 7: Saturday 10th November 2007

Once again we started out at 5: 30, and, after a quick cup of coffee, walked along the path towards the Main Caves, before returning for an early breakfast. We then packed and departed at 8:30 AM, with a long but enjoyable drive ahead of us. Not long after passing through the 'town' of Hlatikulu (more like a scattered collection of huts and corrugated iron shacks) we entered prime farmland, and spotted a pair of rare Wattled Cranes with a chick as well as a pair of more common Grey Crowned Cranes. After observing them for a while and getting good scope-views we continued, arriving in Himeville in time for lunch. After eating we were underway again and arrived at the Sani Pass Hotel in the late afternoon. As a last activity for the day we took a walk in the hotel grounds, in the process causing consternation for a 4-ball of golfers on the course while looking for birds. Species recorded for the day included Grey and Black-headed Herons, Yellow-billed Egret, Southern Bald, Sacred and Hadedda Ibises, Secretarybird, Lammergeier, Cape Vulture, Yellow-billed and Black-shouldered Kites, Steppe and Jackal Buzzards, Lanner Flacon, Rock Kestrel, Red-eyed Dove, Diderick Cuckoo, Speckled Mousebird, Brown-throated Martin, Black Saw-wing, White-throated Swallow, Black-headed Oriole, Cape Wagtail, Bokmakierie, Pied Starling and many others.

Daily Bird Total: 81 species.

New Birds for the day: 8 species.

Bird Trip Total: 141 species.

Day 8: Sunday 11th November 2007

We met early for a 7:00 pick-up by Prof. Steven Piper for a full day trip up the famous Sani Pass, one of the few vehicular routes between the Lesotho plateau and KwaZulu-Natal. The day dawned with thick mist, but as this burned off a most stunning day revealed itself (it seems in the mountains that the days that begin with mist turn out to be lovely days, and the days that dawn clear turn worse weather-wise as the day wears on). Unfortunately, I couldn't partake in the day's adventure, as the space limitations didn't allow for one more in the vehicle. All I can say is that the weather was as good as it gets, and the group returned at 6:00 PM bushed but raving about a great day up the mountain. Birds for the day included Long-crested Eagle, Black Harrier (a 'mega-tick'; one of only three endemic raptors in Southern Africa), Jacobin Cuckoo (uncommon in the area, according to Prof. Piper), Horus Swift, Half-collared Kingfisher, Red-throated Wryneck, Cape Sparrow, Sentinel Rock-Thrush, Drakensberg Siskin, Sickle-winged Chat, Layard's Tit-babbler, Fairy Flycatcher, Yellow Canary and Speckled Pigeon (pictured above left). Some of the species seen on top of the plateau, such as the last four mentioned, are at the eastern edge of their ranges and are not found below the top, making for interesting birding (they're common Karoo / arid savannah birds). The Drakensberg Siskin was a real special for the area, and unfortunately a distant Drakensberg Rockjumper pointed out by Prof. Piper was not considered 'tickable' by the group, and rightly so. We once again met at seven for dinner, and soon thereafter retired. For the second night in a row, we were serenaded by a Buff-spotted Flufftail as we got ready for bed, the haunting, fog-horn like calls of which continued until dawn (some of the group had joined me in attempting to find it on the first afternoon at the hotel, but without luck).

Daily Bird Total: 50 species.

New Birds for the day: 12 species.

Bird Trip Total: 153 species.

Day 9: Monday 12th November 2007

We left the hotel at 5:30 AM, and headed through Underberg and on the Nxumeni Forest near Donnybrook for a spot of forest birding. We arrived with the forest shrouded in mist, which soon began lifting. The birding was difficult however, with new species only coming at long intervals, and often the sightings were very brief. We walked up and down the road leading through the forest, eventually ending up with a handful of new birds for the list – Collared and Southern Double-collared Sunbirds, Bar-throated Apalis, Knysna Turaco, African Goshawk, Sombre Greenbul and Crowned Hornbill, as well as a lot of 'heard only' birds: Emerald Cuckoo, Olive Bush Shrike, Orange Ground-Thrush and Southern Boubou. We left the forest at mid-morning and took up an invitation for tea at Prof. Piper's house in Underberg, lured by the promise of the multitudes of sunbirds that are regulars at his feeders. We weren't disappointed, and had extremely good views of Malachite, Amethyst and Greater Double-collared Sunbirds, as well as Olive Woodpecker, Black-headed Oriole, Red-billed Quelea and other garden birds. We then headed back to the hotel for lunch, and for the afternoon took a walk in the hotel grounds. Other birds for the day included African Darter, Booted and Long-crested Eagles, African Marsh Harrier, Giant and Half-collared Kingfishers, African Hoopoe, Red-throated Wryneck, Dusky Flycatcher, Cape Batis, Golden-breasted Bunting, Cape and Forest Canaries. The resident Buff-spotted Flufftail began calling at dusk, and after dinner a torch-bearing search party was dispatched, but to no avail. This bird usually calls from dense undergrowth, and is very difficult to find even when it is calling

close by. Well, at least we tried...

Daily Bird Total: 64 species.

New Birds for the day: 12 species.

Bird Trip Total: 165 species.

Day 10: Tuesday 13th November 2007

We started the day with a lovely walk up the golf course (no golfers this time), with the sun already quite hot by seven AM when we returned for a chance to pack before breakfast. New birds included Black Cuckoo and a Common Quail flushed from a vegetation hazard next to the 8th green. After breakfast we did some more packing and departed at 9:15 AM, with a long day ahead in getting to Memel. En-route we stopped off briefly at Chelmsford Nature Reserve, where we saw Black-bellied Bustard and Green Wood-hoopoe as new species for the list. We eventually arrived at Mahem Guest House at 6:00 PM, and met for dinner an hour later before retiring early after a rather long and tiring day of travel. Other birds for the day included White-faced Duck, a flock of 80+ Grey Crowned Cranes, Wattled Lapwing, White-rumped Swift, Speckled Mousebird, Karoo Prinia, Cape Glossy Starling, Fan-tailed Widowbird and others.

Daily Bird Total: 61 species.

New Birds for the day: 8 species.

Bird Trip Total: 173 species.

Day 11: Wednesday 14th November 2007

We left the guest house at 5:30 AM, and did some road-side birding along the eastern perimeter of the Seekoeivlei Nature Reserve. It was a fine morning, and notable birds included Cape Shoveler, Grey-winged Francolin, Secretarybird (our fourth sighting for the trip, pictured in flight to the left below), Blue Korhaan (we saw 20 + during the day), Wood Sandpiper, African Snipe (a male drumming in the sky over a marsh close by), Black-winged Stilt, White-winged Tern, Spike-heeled and Red-capped Larks, Zitting Cisticola, African Pipit (by the dozen), Cape Longclaw and others. We then returned for breakfast, after which we took a drive into the nature reserve. Unfortunately the reserve was mostly off-limits due to the heavy rains, and we couldn't get into the main section. We did however get good views of Great and Little Egrets, Grey Crowned Crane, African Spoonbill and Red-billed Teal in some shallow pans in the farmland just out of town, as well as the usual hordes of Widowbirds, Bishops and Weavers along the roadsides. After a most delicious light lunch we had some foot-up time, and then explored the western perimeter of the reserve as an afternoon activity. Here we saw plenty of the usual birds, as well as a great sighting of African Harrier-Hawk (with usually yellow face flushed a bright red in excitement / display), countless more croaking Blue Korhaans (their calls are loud and distinctly frog-like), more of the same larks and pipits, Ant-eating Chat, Cape Longclaw and Whiskered Tern. A highlight was a stop in the late afternoon on a small bridge in the middle of the farmland, with hundreds of South African Cliff Swallows (which were nesting under the bridge, picture to the right) flying all around us. We arrived back in time for a short break (our afternoon activity began later than usual as the weather was rather hot and windy) before another wonderful dinner prepared by the Mahem Guest House team.

Daily Bird Total: 64 species.

New Birds for the day: 13 species.

Bird Trip Total: 186 species.

Day 12: Thursday 15th November 2007

Having received news that the reserve had just been opened we left once again at 5: 30 AM, with the intentions of entering the main part of the reserve. This was not to be however, as, although the reserve was technically 'open', unbeknownst to us a lock for which we had no key was put on the gate and only removed at 8:00 AM, thus opening the reserve for the day – what birder would want to arrive after eight in the morning, one might ask? Anyway, after overcoming our frustrations and disappointment, we circled around the entire reserve perimeter, arriving back for breakfast at 9:00 AM as planned. Afterwards we went back to a spot where we'd had brief views of a Giant Kingfisher during the early morning, but weren't able to find it again. The wind had heat had picked up substantially, making for adverse birding conditions, but we were rewarded with a good sighting of three Blue-cheeked Bee-Eaters sitting on a fence. They caused much confusion initially (an aberrant European Bee-Eater colour-form, I thought as I saw the first b, as they were somewhat out of their normal range, but we soon made the correct identification. We duly returned for lunch, and afterwards headed up into the high country for some 2000 metre-plus birding along the Verkykerskop Road. A summer convection thunderstorm had built up however, and the start was undertaken in heavy showers. It cleared later however, and we had a lovely afternoon of birding. A single Blue Crane was found by John, and the only other new bird recorded was Pale-crowned Cisticola. We also saw a group of Dassies, or Rock Hyrax, that had taken over an old shed in the middle of a large field with nary a single rock to be seen for miles – showing how some species can adapt to human alteration of the available habitat (these were soon dubbed 'Shed Hyrax'). With the sun shining through after the rain we arrived back in the late afternoon and met for a final dinner in the evening.

Daily Bird Total: 68 species.

New Birds for the day: 3 species.

Bird Trip Total: 189 species.

Day 13: Friday 16th November 2007

Once again we started out early, heading out onto the Mount Pelaaan Road. The weather was not very good however, and as we climbed we soon became engulfed in thick mist, with intermittent rain and a cold wind blowing. We gave it our best however, but didn't manage to locate Rudd's or Botha's Larks – two of the special birds for the area. We did however see Eastern Long-billed Lark as a new species for the list, as well as Red-capped and Spike-heeled Larks, Rufous-chested Sparrowhawk (we had a great view of this normally elusive Accipiter, and seven individuals seen on one trip is a personal record), Steppe Buzzard, Diderick Cuckoo, Cape Longclaw (our best photographic opportunity so far – see front cover picture), Banded Martin (pictured left), Greater Striped Swallow and many other common grassland species. We arrived back at the guest house for breakfast, and departed at 10:00 AM for Johannesburg (seeing a high-flying Pied Kingfisher as our last new bird for Memel). We had a stop at the Marievale Bird Sanctuary south-east of the city, where we had a picnic lunch, and some last birding before the end of the trip. New birds recorded in this wetland area included Pied Avocet, Hottentot Teal, Fulvous Duck, Southern Pochard, Great Crested Grebe, Goliath Heron, Black Egret, Glossy Ibis, African Purple Swamphen, Common Moorhen, Ruff, Little Stint, African Palm Swift and, as we were leaving, a Burchell's Coucal flapping lazily across the road in front of us – the last official new bird of the trip (the unofficial being a flock of Grey-headed Gulls seen close to the airport by some). With an ominous black cloud formation forming to the west and over the city I decided to get going a little early, expecting traffic problems if the storm broke before we arrived at the airport. Fortunately

we just missed the storm, but in any event the massive electrical storm broke half an hour later and held up the flight to Heathrow for around three hours (if it makes any of the participants feel any better I was stuck at snail's pace on the highway in bumper-to-bumper traffic, torrential rain and general mayhem for an hour and a quarter before getting home).

Daily Bird Total: 72 species.

New Birds for the trip: 16 species.

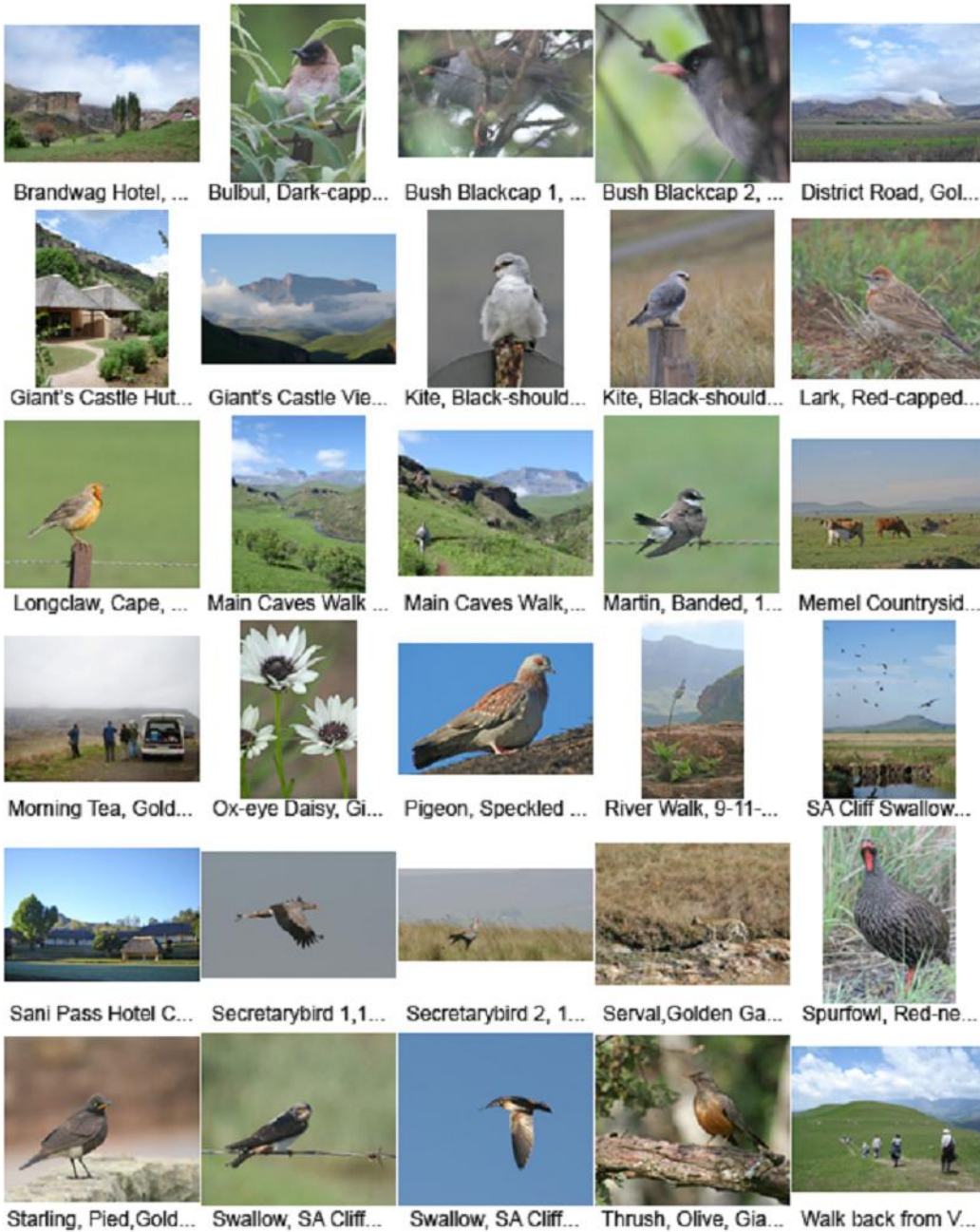
Bird Trip Total: 205 species.

Acknowledgements:

Thanks first of all to all for joining us on the tour. It really was something a bit different, and we got to see many places that are usually missed by most tourists to South Africa. We saw some wonderful birds, and the general scenery was extraordinarily beautiful and hard to put into words (perhaps some of the pictures will say it better). It was hard to narrow down the highlights, and for each person they are different, but for me they included the Lammergeier at Giant's Castle, our second morning's walk there up to the Main Caves, and sitting on the bridge near Memel while hundreds of Cliff Swallows swirled and chattered all around us. Anyway, thanks again to all for their contributions, and may the tour run again soon!

Leon Marais.

Thumbnail pictures from the tour...



169	African Harrier-Hawk	3	1	<i>Polyboroides typus</i>
172	Lanner Falcon	1	1	<i>Falco biarmicus</i>
181	Rock Kestrel	5	2	<i>Falco rupicolus</i>
190	Grey-winged Francolin (E)	5	2	<i>Scelopoptila africanus</i>
198	Red-necked Spurwing (Francolin)	2	1	<i>Pternistes afer</i>
199	Swainson's Spurwing (Francolin) (NE)	8	2	<i>Pternistes swainsonii</i>
200	Common Quail	1	1	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>
203	Helmeted Guineafowl	10	3	<i>Numidamaeleagris</i>
207	Wattled Crane	1	1	<i>Grus carunculatus</i>
208	Blue Crane (E)	1	1	<i>Anthropoides paradiseus</i>
209	Grey (Southern) Crowned Crane	6	3	<i>Balearica regulorum</i>
218	Buff-spotted Flufftail	3H		<i>Sarothrura elegans</i>
223	African Purple Swamphen	1	1	<i>Porphyrio madagascariensis</i>
226	Common Moorhen	1	1	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
228	Red-knobbed Coot	9	3	<i>Fulica cristata</i>
234	Blue Korhaan (E)	2	3	<i>Eupodotis caerulescens</i>
238	Black-bellied Bustard	1	1	<i>Eupodotis melanogaster</i>
239b	Northern Black Korhaan (E)	1	1	<i>Eupodotis afraoides</i>
249	Three-banded Plover	1	1	<i>Charadrius tricollaris</i>
255	Crowned Lapwing (Plover)	3	1	<i>Vanellus coronatus</i>
258	Blacksmith Lapwing (Plover)	5	2	<i>Vanellus armatus</i>
260	African Wattled Lapwing (Plover)	2	1	<i>Vanellus senegallus</i>
266	Wood Sandpiper	2	1	<i>Tringa glareola</i>
274	Little Stint	1	1	<i>Calidris minuta</i>
284	Ruff	1	3	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>
286	African (Ethiopian) Snipe	2	1	<i>Gallinago nigripennis</i>
294	Pied Avocet	1	1	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
295	Black-winged Stilt	3	1	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
297	Spotted Thick-knee (Dikkop)	1	1	<i>Burhinus capensis</i>
315	Grey-headed Gull	1	2	<i>Larus cirrocephalus</i>
338	Whiskered Tern	3	3	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>
339	White-winged Tern	2	3	<i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>
348	Rock Dove (Feral Pigeon)	2	2	<i>Columba livia</i>
349	Speckled (Rock) Pigeon	11	3	<i>Columba guinea</i>
350	African Olive-Pigeon (Rameyan Pigeon)	2	1	<i>Columba arquatrix</i>
352	Red-eyed Dove	5	2	<i>Streptopelia semitorquata</i>
354	Cape Turtle-Dove	8	3	<i>Streptopelia capicola</i>
355	Laughing Dove	6	3	<i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>
360	Lemon (Cinnamon) Dove	1	1	<i>Aplopelia larvata</i>
370a	Knysna Turaco (Lourie) (E)	1	1	<i>Tauraco coropteryx</i>
377	Red-chested Cuckoo	4	1	<i>Cuculus solitarius</i>
378	Black Cuckoo	1	1	<i>Cuculus clamor</i>
382	Jacobin Cuckoo	1	1	<i>Clamator jacobinus</i>
384	African Emerald Cuckoo	1H		<i>Chrysococcyx caprius</i>
385	Klaas's Cuckoo	2H		<i>Chrysococcyx klaas</i>
386	Diderick Cuckoo	4	2	<i>Chrysococcyx caprius</i>
391a	Burchell's Coucal	1	1	<i>Centropus burchellii</i>
412	African Black Swift	8	3	<i>Apus barbatus</i>
415	White-rumped Swift	2	2	<i>Apus caffer</i>
416	Horus Swift	1	1	<i>Apus horus</i>
417	Little Swift	2	2	<i>Apus affinis</i>
418	Alpine Swift	7	3	<i>Apus melba</i>
424	Speckled Mousebird	5	2	<i>Colius striatus</i>
428	Pied Kingfisher	1	1	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
429	Giant Kingfisher	2	1	<i>Ceryle maxima</i>
430	Half-collared Kingfisher	2	1	<i>Alcedo semitorquata</i>
431	Malachite Kingfisher	1	1	<i>Alcedo cristata</i>
438	European Bee-eater	1	1	<i>Merops apiaster</i>
440	Blue-cheeked Bee-eater	1	1	<i>Merops persicus</i>
451	African Hoopoe	3	1	<i>Upupa africana</i>
460	Crowned Hornbill	1	1	<i>Tockus alboterminatus</i>

473	Crested Barb et	3	1	<i>Trach yphonus vailantii</i>
480	Ground Woodpe cker (E)	5	2	<i>Geoco lapt es olivace us</i>
488	Olive Wo odpeck er	1	1	<i>Den dropico s g riseacephalus</i>
489	Red -throat ed Wryneck	3	1	<i>Jynx rufico llis</i>
494	Rufous -naped Lark	1	1	<i>Mirafra africa na</i>
500	Easte rn Long -billed Lark (E)	1	1	<i>Cert hilauda sem itorquata</i>
506	Spike -heeled Lark	2	1	<i>Che rsoma nes albofasciata</i>
507	Red -capped Lark	3	1	<i>Ca landrella cine rea</i>
518	Barn (Eur opean) S wallow	8	3	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
520	White -throat ed Swa llow	7	3	<i>Hirundo albigularis</i>
526	Great er Str iped Swa llow (E)	12	3	<i>Hirundo c uculata</i>
528	South African C liff-Swa llow (E)	5	3	<i>Hirundo spilode ra</i>
529	Rock Mar tin	7	3	<i>Hirundo fuligula</i>
533	Br own -throated Ma rtin	7	3	<i>Ripari a paludic ola</i>
534	Banded Mart in	5	2	<i>Ripari a cincta</i>
536	Black Saw -wing (S wallow)	3	1	<i>Psali dprocn e holomelas</i>
541	Fork -tailed Dron go	5	2	<i>Dicru rus adsimilis</i>
545	(East ern) Black -headed Or iole	2	1	<i>Oriolus larvatus</i>
547	Cape (B lack) Cr ow	9	23	<i>Corvus capensis</i>
548	Pied Cr ow	3	2	<i>Corvus albus</i>
550	White -necked Raven	7	3	<i>Corvus albicolis</i>
554	Southern Black Tit	3	1	<i>Parus niger</i>
565	Bush Black cap (E)	4	2	<i>Liop tilus nigricapillus</i>
567	Afri can Red -eyed Bu lbul (NE)	2	1	<i>Pycno notus nigricans</i>
568	Dark -capped (Black eyed) Bulbul	10	3	<i>Pycno notus barbatus</i>
572	Sombre Greenbul (Bulbul)	1	1	<i>And ropadus imp ortunus</i>
577	Olive Thrush	7	2	<i>Turdus olivace us</i>
579	Orange Ground -Thrush	1H		<i>Zoot hera gurneyi</i>
581	Cape Rock -Thrus h (E)	5	1	<i>Mon ticola rupestris</i>
582	Sentinel Rock -Thrush (E)	1	1	<i>Mon ticola explorator</i>
587	Capped W heatear	1	1	<i>Oen anthe pileata</i>
586	Mounta in Wheatear (Chat) (NE)	3	1	<i>Oen anthe monticola</i>
588	Buff -streaked Chat (E)	2	1	<i>Oen anthe bifasciata</i>
589	Fam iliar Chat	6	2	<i>Cercom ela fam iliaris</i>
591	Sickle-winged Chat (E)	1	1	<i>Cercom ela sinuata</i>
593	Mo cking C liff-Chat	1	1	<i>Tham nolaea cin nam omeiventris</i>
595	(Southe rn) Ant -eating Chat (E)	6	2	<i>Myrm ecocich la formici vora</i>
596	Afri can (Comm on) St one chat	13	3	<i>Saxicola to rquata</i>
598	Chor ister Rob in -Chat (Rob in) (E)	1	1	<i>Cos sypha dich roa</i>
601	Cape Rob in -Chat (Rob in)	10	3	<i>Cos sypha caffra</i>
622	Layard's Tit -babbl er (E)	1	1	<i>Pari soma layardi</i>
637	Dark -capped (Afri can) Yel low Warb ler	2	1	<i>Chlorop eta natalensis</i>
639	Bar ratt 's Warb ler (E)	3	1	<i>Bra dypterus barratti</i>
643	Willow Warb ler	2	1	<i>Phyl loscopus trochilus</i>
645	Bar -throated Apalis	1	1	<i>Apalis thoracica</i>
661	Cape Gra ssbird (E)	3	2	<i>Sphen oeaacus afer</i>
664	Zitt ing (Fan -tailed) C isticola	2	1	<i>Cistic ola junci dis</i>
667	Wing -snappin g (Ayres ') Cisticola	2	2	<i>Cistic ola ayresii</i>
668	Pale -crowned C isticola (NE)	1	1	<i>Cistic ola cin namom eus</i>
670	Wai ling C isticola	5	2	<i>Cistic ola lais</i>
677	Levai llant's Cisticola	6	2	<i>Cistic ola tinniens</i>
679	La zy Cist icola	2	1	<i>Cistic ola aberrans</i>
681	Neddi cky	1	1	<i>Cistic ola fulvica pillus</i>
686a	Karoo (Spot ted) P rinia (E)	2	1	<i>Prin ia maculosa</i>
690	Afri can Dusky F lycatch er	2	1	<i>Muscic apa adusta</i>
698	Fiscal Flycatch er (E)	1	1	<i>Sigelus silens</i>
700	Cape Bat is (E)	3	1	<i>Batis capensis</i>
706	Fairy Flyca tche r (E)	1	1	<i>Stenostira scita</i>
710	Afri can Parad ise Flyca tche r	4	2	<i>Terpsi phone viridis</i>
713	Cape Wagtai l	8	2	<i>Mot acilla capensis</i>
716	Afri can (Gras sveld) Pipit	4	3	<i>Anthus cin namomeus</i>

717	Long-billed Pipit	2	1	<i>Anthus similis</i>
725	Yellow-breasted Pipit (E)	1	1	<i>Hemimacronyx chloris</i>
727	Cape (Orange-throated) Longclaw (E)	7	3	<i>Macronyx capensis</i>
732	Common Fiscal (Fiscal Shrike)	10	3	<i>Lanius collaris</i>
736	Southern Boubou (E)	2H		<i>Lanius ferrugineus</i>
740	Black-backed Puffback	2	1	<i>Dryoscopus cucullatus</i>
746	Bokmakerie (E)	9	2	<i>Telophorus zeylonus</i>
750	Olive Bush-Shrike	1H		<i>Telophorus olivaceus</i>
758	Common (Indian) Myna	6	3	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>
759	(African) Pied Starling (E)	9	3	<i>Spreo bicolor</i>
764	Cape Glossy Starling	3	1	<i>Lampornis nitens</i>
769	Red-winged Starling	12	3	<i>Onychognathus morio</i>
774	Gurney's Sugarbird (E)	3	1	<i>Promerops gurneyi</i>
775	Malchite Sunbird	7	1	<i>Nectarinia famosa</i>
783	Southern Double-collared Sunbird (E)	1	1	<i>Nectarinia chalybeata</i>
785	Greater Double-collared Sunbird (E)	5	2	<i>Nectarinia afra</i>
792	Amethyst (African Black) Sunbird	1	1	<i>Nectarinia amethystina</i>
793	Collared Sunbird	1	1	<i>Hedychia collaris</i>
796	Cape White-eye (E)	7	2	<i>Zosterops pallidus</i>
801	House Sparrow	8	2	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
803	Cape Sparrow (NE)	4	1	<i>Passer melanurus</i>
804	Southern Grey-headed Sparrow	9	2	<i>Passer diffusus</i>
813	Cape Weaver (E)	10	3	<i>Ploceus capensis</i>
814	Southern Masked-Weaver	9	2	<i>Ploceus velatus</i>
821	Red-billed Quelea	3	1	<i>Quelea quelea</i>
824	Southern Red Bishop	9	3	<i>Euplectes orix</i>
827	Yellow Bishop	5	2	<i>Euplectes capensis</i>
828	Fan-tailed Widowbird	4	2	<i>Euplectes axillaris</i>
831	Red-collared Widowbird (Widow)	8	2	<i>Euplectes ardens</i>
832	Long-tailed Widowbird (Widow)	12	3	<i>Euplectes prognus</i>
846	Common Waxbill	7	2	<i>Estrilda astrild</i>
860	Pin-tailed Whydah	10	2	<i>Vidua macroura</i>
870	Black-throated Canary	3	1	<i>Serinus atrogularis</i>
872	Cape Canary	12	3	<i>Serinus canicollis</i>
873	Forest Canary (E)	2	2	<i>Serinus scotops</i>
875	Drakensberg Siskin (E)	1	1	<i>Pseudochloroptila symonsi</i>
878	Yellow Canary (NE)	2	1	<i>Serinus flaviventris</i>
881	Streaky-headed Seedeater (Canary)	5	1	<i>Serinus gularis</i>
884	Golden-breasted Bunting	1	1	<i>Emberiza flaviventris</i>
885	Cape Bunting (NE)	4	1	<i>Emberiza capensis</i>

Checklist of Mammals Seen During Tour

Antelope, Roan	Oribi
Baboon, Chacma	Otter, Cape Clawless
Blesbok	Rat, Sloggett's
Dassie, Rock (Hyrax)	Reedbuck, Common
Duiker, Common	Reedbuck, Mountain
Eland	Serval
Fox, Cape	Springbok
Hare, Scrub	Squirrel, Ground
Hartebeest, Red	Steenbok
Jackal, Black-backed	Suricate
Mongoose, Slender	Wildebeest, Black
Mongoose, Yellow	Zebra, Burchell's
Mouse, Striped	